

Interfaith org holds delegate assembly

By Molly Ritvo - Tuesday April 29 2008



GBIO members, front row, Fran Godine, Rabbi Jonah Pesner and Gertrude Delsoin; top row, Rabbi Stephanie Kolin, Alliea Group, Rev. Hurman Hamilton, Chuck Koplik and Brother Jack Rathschmidt

GBIO advocates for elder care issues in Newton

Standing before more than 300 leaders of different faiths at a Greater Boston Interfaith Organization action meeting, Massachusetts Secretary of Elder Affairs Michael Festa recently spoke about the importance of supporting the elderly population.

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The assembly, which was held on April 8 at Temple Emanuel in Newton, aimed to make an impact on the issues of elder care, according to Meir Lakein, head community organizer for the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston. The meeting also represented the first time a Boston Conservative synagogue became involved in congregational organizing.

"The traditional rep has been for many years that 'social action' is something that Reform and Reconstructionist Jews do," Lakein said. "Temple Emanuel is one of the first Conservative synagogues in the country, and most likely the most prominent one, to get deeply engaged in organizing. This is an

important precedent of a much larger significance."

Nahma Nadich, director of social justice programs at the JCRC whose work is funded by the Nathan Cummings Foundation, explained that GBIO represents more than 50,000 people from different congregations and churches that have joined together since 1996 and coalesced around social and economic issues they have advocated for changing.

"[The assembly] was a diverse, racially and religiously, gathering focusing primarily on two of GBIO's current campaigns, health care and aging with dignity," said Nadich. She added that GBIO lobbied for the passing of legislation designed to provide health care coverage to every Massachusetts resident. "The action at the meeting will model how organizing is moving into more religiously traditional segments of the Jewish world."

Lakein explained that GBIO has an immediate goal of improving the navigability of the service system for elders. "Seniors and their caregivers need to access information more easily," he said. "GBIO is also looking for more resources for home care for seniors who are not eligible for Medicaid, but don't have enough money to pay for everything out of pocket."

Lakein also noted another goal of the event was to secure a relationship with Secretary Festa.

“GBIO reached an understanding with Secretary Festa that his office will work to redesign the state’s elder care website, the first point of access for many seniors and caregivers, so that it is more user friendly; improve the state’s 1-800-age-info system so that people can receive assistance regardless of language and even of they are caring for elderly relatives out of state, and to design a better education and marketing campaign to address the lack of public knowledge about resources,” he said.

Secretary Festa agreed that more work needs to be done. “It doesn’t really help to have great programs if people don’t know about them,” he said. “We know that there is more training that needs to be done. I’ll make a commitment to that.”

Reverend Burns Stanfield of the Fourth Presbyterian Church in South Boston inspired the attendees to recognize the work GBIO has accomplished in the last year.

“We have sat at the table and got \$100 million for affordable health care,” he said.

Nancy K. Kaufman, executive director of the JCRC, noted that the meeting met its goal of bridging religious gaps.

“It was well attended by representatives of the Christian, Jewish and Muslim communities,” she said. “It was a wonderful demonstration of the power of working together across faith lines on a common social justice agenda based on shared values.”

Lakein added: “Our community has needs that we can’t meet alone. Our population of seniors is growing to the point that we alone simply will not be able to marshal the resources necessary for them to truly age with dignity.”

GBIO will host its 10th anniversary celebration on May 27 with Governor Patrick and Mayor Menino in attendance.

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